No. 11. April, 1923.

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# WALKER'S QUARTERLY

# WILLIAM TURNER

OF OXFORD

WATER-COLOUR PAINTER

Born 1789. Died 1862.

BY

A. L. BALDRY

BY APPOINTMENT

WALKER'S GALLERIES
118, NEW BOND STREET
LONDON, W. 1

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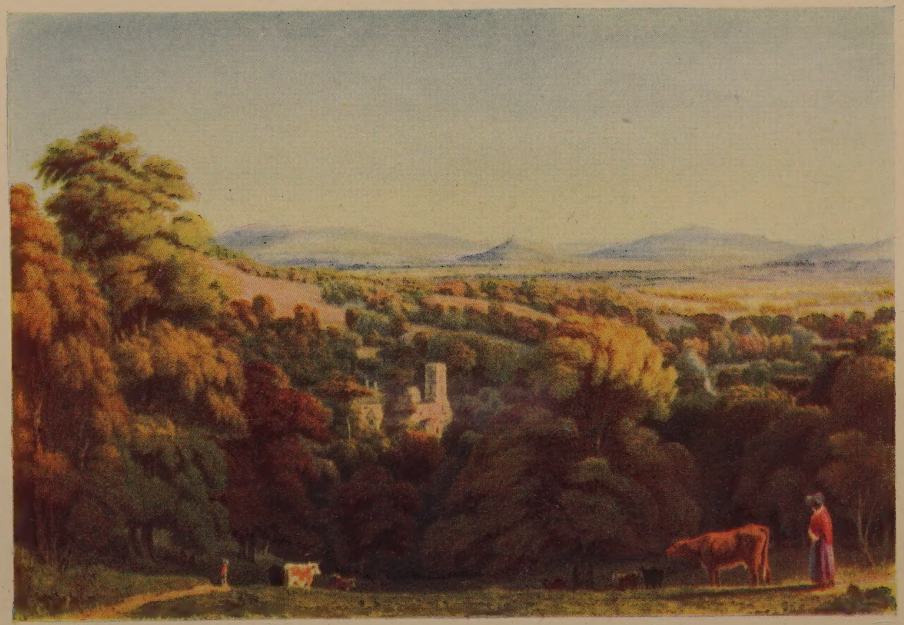

Size 20¾ × 14¼ ins.

LANE NEAR BUCKLAND, GLOUCESTERSHIRE, IN AUTUMN

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# WILLIAM TURNER,
## OF OXFORD

IT can fairly be claimed that the British water-colour school has been fortunate in the men who have contributed to its development and have helped to build up its traditions. To its credit stands a considerable list of great masters who rank high in our art history and whose achievement will bear comparison with anything that other countries have produced; indeed, in this branch of practice British painters have set the standard by which the work of their competitors throughout the world must be measured. They have demonstrated most completely the capacities of their medium; they have evolved the methods by which its genius can be best expressed, and they have provided the examples to which all other workers in water-colour must refer for guidance and instruction.

Yet, it is a question whether to these masters alone can be ascribed the stability and authority of the school. No doubt the popular idea would be that they, being undoubtedly masters and supreme exponents of their art, established

the tradition of water-colour painting, and by their influence maintained the principles of practice which their followers and successors were required to observe. This idea, however, is only partly correct. That the master by the dominating force of his personality and by the greatness of his power makes evident the highest possibilities of the art, that he proves its capacity to respond to the finest type of intention, can be fully admitted, but by the very fact of his mastery he stands to some degree apart from the formalities of tradition. He does not so much make rules as give new readings of those which are generally accepted, he is less concerned with the exposition of definite principles than with the application of them in ways which suit only his own individuality. In a sense, the master—because he is a master—is a revolutionary who takes up a system of practice and plays with it inspired tricks which are beyond the reach of plainer men who cannot claim the privileges of genius.

Really, if there were a school which included nothing but masters, it would not be a school at all, for every one of them would be going his own way and neither following a tradition nor subscribing to any set of principles. To enable a school to exist there must be a majority of quiet, sober, plodding men who devote themselves

to making the rules to which the masters provide the exceptions, men who are content to remain inconspicuous and to do the best they can for the art in which they believe. They may not be brilliant, but their work is sound, and it deserves the respect of all lovers of serious and disciplined craftsmanship and of all students of sincerely directed artistic effort. It is important, too, because it sets forth frankly those essentials of technical procedure on which even the most daring excursions of the aspiring master must be based if he is to do justice to his capacities.

From the ranks of these lesser men come, as a rule, the most efficient teachers. The very lack of originality which makes them minor artists creates in them a better understanding of the difficulties and struggles of the beginner, and their instinctive concentration upon matters of technique enables them to guide the learner more surely in his striving to solve the mechanical problems of his profession. They do not by vehemence of personality overpower the student and turn him into an obsequious imitator, as the great masters often do, but they inculcate in him a sense of discipline and a regard for artistic responsibilities which will stabilise his effort when he seeks to give expression to the promptings of his individuality.

The minor artist, therefore, is amply entitled

to recognition, and his services to the art of his country deserve full acknowledgment. He sets a good example, and though the power to rise conspicuously above the general level has been denied to him he maintains a quality of accomplishment that is, within its limits, thoroughly satisfying. His earnest desire to do as well as he possibly can what, with his knowledge of his own limitations, he realises that he is able to do is a reminder to other artists of the value of sincerity; his unwillingness to make himself ridiculous by attempting ambitious undertakings which he feels to be beyond his reach implies a self-respect that is worthy of imitation; and his contentment with the station in art life that he is fitted to occupy is a praiseworthy acceptance of the inevitable which men of less balanced mind might with advantage seek to acquire. Decidedly, he has a good influence in the art of his time and he fills his place in the scheme of things with credit to himself.

So, it is not a disparagement to describe a man like William Turner, of Oxford, as a minor artist—certainly, in such a description there is no suggestion involved that he did not hold a position of real distinction and considerable authority. Perhaps, his relation to his greater contemporaries would be better expressed by calling him one of the lesser masters in the

British water-colour school, for that rank can fairly be assigned to him. It would scarcely be possible to compare him with his great namesake, and he had neither the dignified robustness of De Wint nor the sparkling freshness and freedom of David Cox; but he was so serious in intention, so correct in his methods, and so scrupulous in his observance of right principles in his practice, that he came nearer to these great leaders than most of the men of his time. With all his gifts, however, and all his devotion to his art, he was never able to touch the supreme heights; he had not the temperament to become a dominant figure amongst his fellows, and that subtle balance of qualities which is the endowment of the absolute master he, seemingly, did not possess.

In the story of his life can be read much that throws light upon his character; it is a record of simple, straightforward effort and consistent industry, unbroken by any adventurous excursions, and placidly uneventful through a long succession of years. He does not seem to have been at any time ambitious to play an active part in the politics of art or to interest himself in new movements; he was content to remain in the background, busy always with his own work, and occupied constantly with his pupils, to whom he sought to impart a full measure of his studious sincerity. His wanderings in search

of subjects for his paintings were confined to the British Isles: there is no record of his ever having been abroad, and though he exhibited some drawings of Swiss and Italian scenes, these were avowedly adaptations from sketches made by someone else. Evidently he did not think it necessary to travel far afield to find the type of material that pleased him best.

William Turner was born, on November 12, 1789, at Blackbourton, in Oxfordshire, and, having been left an orphan in his childhood, was brought up by an uncle who lived first at Burford and later at the manor house of Shipton-on-Cherwell, six miles from Oxford. The boy must have given evidence of his artistic aspirations at an early age, for when he was not more than fifteen he was apprenticed to John Varley, and went to London as a resident pupil in the house of that famous teacher. There he remained for a period of seven years, during which he received a thorough training, and came, no doubt, into contact with many young artists who were destined to take eventually positions of much prominence.

That he made good progress under Varley's tuition is proved by his election in the spring of 1808—when he was only eighteen—as an Associate of the Water-Colour Society, which had been recently founded, and by his advance-

Size 30½ × 22 ins.

NEAR BIRDLIP, GLOUCESTERSHIRE

ment to full membership in the autumn of the same year. It may be noted here that he remained a member of this Society—now the Royal Society of Painters in Water-Colours—for the rest of his life, and that for fifty-five years he never failed to contribute to its exhibitions. Further evidence of the estimation in which he was held at this early stage of his career is provided by his inclusion among the original members of what was popularly known as "The Sketching Society," which came into existence in 1808.

This association, of which the official title was "The Society for the Study of Epic and Pastoral Design," was created by J. J. Chalon and his brother, A. E. Chalon, and Francis Stevens, the water-colour painter who in his later life was known as "Stevens of Exeter." The membership of it was at first limited to eight, and the artists chosen to make up the full number were Cornelius, the brother of John Varley, William Turner, Thomas Webster, the architect, Michael Sharp, portrait and subject painter, and Henry Pierce Bone, the painter in enamel. The Society met weekly at the homes of the different members in rotation during the season from October to April, and its method of procedure was to devote a couple of hours to drawings of subjects chosen by the president for

the evening, "chiefly from the ancient classics," to follow on with a supper, and then, after supper, to set the drawings up one by one for comment and criticism. As William Turner was by many years the youngest of the group, his admission to it certainly implies that he was regarded as something more than a promising student, and that he was worthy of a place among men who were already of established reputation.

Yet, this ready acceptance did not induce him to remain in London. Apparently, life in the metropolis did not appeal to him or, perhaps, he felt that in quieter surroundings and with less distractions he would be better able to do the sort of work that he desired. Anyhow, as soon as the term of his apprenticeship came to an end he returned to Oxford and settled down there, in 1811, to practise his profession; and from that time onwards, until his death in 1862, he seems to have rarely left his home except for his periodical sketching trips to places which offered him suitable material for his pictures, and for his occasional visits to London to attend the meetings of the Water-Colour Society. He was married, in 1824, at Shipton, to Elizabeth Ilott, but he had no family.

Although much of his time must have been taken up with teaching, for he had always a

large number of pupils among the members of the University and the residents in and about Oxford, he was a fairly prolific artist; his contributions to the exhibitions of the Water-Colour Society during the fifty-five years of his membership numbered four hundred and fifty-five, and he exhibited thirty-eight paintings besides—most of which were oils—in the galleries of the Royal Academy, the British Institution, and the Society of British Artists. In addition to his exhibited works he must have produced a considerable number of sketches and studies, as he preferred to send to exhibitions elaborated and important paintings rather than things of a slighter type: sometimes he would show a water-colour which had been painted out of doors, but more often he chose works which had been carefully completed in his studio, or entirely carried out there from his preliminary sketches. Indeed, on many occasions he seems to have made the same sketch serve as the motive for several pictures by modifying details in the composition, or by changing the character of the atmospheric effect, so probably he regarded the studies he did directly from nature as part of his necessary stock-in-trade, and was for that reason unwilling to exhibit them or part with them.

As William Turner was accustomed to give

topographical titles to his paintings, the catalogues of the exhibitions to which he contributed provide a good deal of information about his sketching trips and serve sufficiently well as a guide to his wanderings year by year in search of subjects. For some few years after his return to Oxford from London he seems to have been content with the material he found near his home, and to have gone for his most distant excursions to places not farther off than Bristol, Cheltenham, the Wye Valley, and Windsor. In 1815 he showed some subjects from the English lake district, and in 1817 and 1818 some from North Wales and Derbyshire, but for the next seven or eight years he worked mainly round about Oxford, though on one or two occasions he visited Salisbury Plain and Devonshire. Then came a trip to the New Forest, followed by others to Devonshire, Salisbury Plain, North Wales, the Isle of Wight, Sussex, and, in 1836, to the coast of Cornwall.

Two years later he made a very definite break in what had become his regular routine, for he undertook a journey to Scotland and travelled through part of the Highlands and the Isle of Skye. So much impressed was he by the Scottish scenery, and especially by that of the west coast and the Isle of Skye, that he returned again and again and used the material he

Size 23 × 18 ins.

SKYE

collected there as motives for a large proportion of the pictures he painted during the remainder of his life. He had a particular preference for the sea lochs along the west coast: he responded readily to their romantic suggestion, and they provided him with an endless variety of those subtle atmospheric effects which he loved to record. However, this new interest did not absorb him entirely; he painted much in Northumberland and the Lake District, where he probably lingered frequently when he was on his way to or returning from Scotland, he went often to Sussex to work in the wide spaces of the downs, and he never ceased to find inspiration in the picturesque country places which lay within easy reach of Oxford. But during the last few years of his life he did not paint out of doors: he was content to remain at home and to give his time to his pupils, and to such pictures as he could produce in his studio with the assistance of his accumulated stock of notes and sketches.

An interesting impression of the artist as he was at this last stage of his career can be obtained from the recollections of one of his surviving pupils. Sir Thomas Jackson, R.A., the famous architect, while an undergraduate at Oxford, took lessons from William Turner in 1857 and 1858, and has retained to the present

day many memories of a man whom he liked and respected—memories which very kindly he allows to be quoted. He describes his old master as looking like a parson of the old school, dressed in black and wearing a white tie, living a very retired life at his house, 16 John Street, near Worcester College, and unwilling to leave his home even to visit his pupil's rooms in Wadham College. At that time his sketching excursions had ceased, but behind his house he had a small garden in which he grew plants suitable for introduction in the foregrounds of his pictures, so that he was still able to refer to nature for his accessory details, even though for his main subject he had to depend upon memory or upon studies done in previous years.

His method of teaching was characteristically practical and systematic: his custom was to take one of his studies and to paint a picture from it, working stage by stage to full completion and demonstrating the sequence of processes by which the final result was attained. Each of these successive stages constituted a lesson, and between the lessons the pupil took the painting home with him and copied what the master had done, bringing back the copy and original for comparison at the next lesson. In this way a habit of orderly progression in the building up of a picture was developed and the

value of a deliberate technical method was impressed upon his students. The palette he used was simple enough—gamboge, Indian yellow, Prussian blue, and rose madder, with cobalt and brown madder for skies, and Smith's warm grey, a colour of which he was especially fond and one which he regularly employed in painting the rocky foregrounds of his Scottish landscapes.

Sir Thomas Jackson speaks of Turner as one of the most modest and unassuming of men, and as an artist of rare conscientiousness who had never been accorded the consideration he deserved. To his modesty, no doubt, was due his uncomplaining acceptance of the none too kindly way in which his works were treated in the exhibitions of the Water-Colour Society, treatment which induced Ruskin to write, in 1851, "It is not without indignation that I see the drawings of this patient and unassuming master deliberately insulted every year by the Old Water-Colour Society, and placed in consistent degradation at the top of the room, while the commonest affectations and trickeries of vulgar draughtsmanship are constantly hung on the line"; and to his failure to achieve wide popularity can be ascribed that difficulty in selling his works which was to him, as he grew older, a source of much discouragement.

Certainly, a good many of his more important paintings remained in his studio. They were sold at Christie's after his death, and Sir Thomas Jackson recalls how at the sale the contents of Turner's portfolios were disposed of at prices far below their market value. He says, "The sale must have been mismanaged, for I remember the dealers' windows after the sale were full of his drawings priced seven or eight times beyond what they fetched at the auction. I bought for four guineas a large drawing of cattle waiting for the ferry to Skye, which I used to think the pick of his collection, and next week drawings of the same size and finish were offered for £30 and £40." Yet in Turner's earlier years he was generally counted as an artist of distinction by his contemporaries, and the criticisms of Ruskin and other commentators on his work were genuinely appreciative. Probably his disinclination to modify his methods to keep pace with the changes which were proceeding in the practice of water-colours caused his later paintings to be dismissed as old-fashioned, and possibly his retired life in the country, which prevented him from coming much into contact with his fellow artists and fresh clients, led to his being to some extent overlooked. He ceased even his occasional visits to London some ten years before his death, pleading advancing age and

Size $22\frac{1}{2} \times 12\frac{3}{4}$ ins.

VALE OF GLOUCESTER

ill health as the reasons for his inability to attempt the journey.

His quietly industrious career, distinguished always by its singleness of purpose and seriousness of aim, came to an end on August 7, 1862, and he was buried in the graveyard of the church at Shipton-on-Cherwell, the church in which he had been married and for the restoration of which he had, if tradition can be depended upon, supplied the design in 1832. To-day the qualities of his work are, on the whole, better appreciated than they were when he was alive —or at all events, they are estimated more justly now than in his maturer years when he was conscious of undeserved neglect. Fashion has not, it is true, assigned to him a place among the few great masters, but collectors have learned to recognise his powers, and there are many people who would say sincerely with Sir Edward Poynter—as quoted by Sir Thomas Jackson—"No one can do a sky like that nowadays."

# List of Drawings Exhibited in the Royal Academy

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1807 | 143. | A scene from Nature. |
| | 203. | Scene near Woodstock, Oxfordshire. |
| | 510. | A wood scene near Burford, Oxfordshire. |
| 1826 | 241. | A landscape. |
| | 340. | New Forest, Hants. |
| 1837 | 235. | Winter—scene in Cunnerfield, near Oxford. |
| 1839 | 525. | View of Portsmouth Harbour in the time of peace, as it is seen from Portsdown Hill. |
| 1840 | 194. | View near Shipton-on-Cherwell, Oxfordshire. |
| 1846 | 1150. | View from Bow Hill, on the South Downs, near Chichester—Langston and Portsmouth Harbours, and the Isle of Wight in the distance. |
| 1857 | 475. | A view near Burton Dasset, Warwickshire. |

As a member of the Old Water-colour Society he exhibited 446 water-colours from the year 1808 till the date of his death.

A fine collection of 155 water-colours was exhibited in the University Galleries, Oxford, in a Loan Exhibition, in 1895.

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if now little remembered, possessed such influence in his lifetime that he was popularly known as the 'Dictator of the Royal Academy,' which, however, is no criterion of his artistic capabilities. The latter were perhaps underrated, for Farington belonged to the older school of painters, and his work was consequently not appreciated by the rising generation. He was an accurate and careful draughtsman, and his colour, if not brilliant, was generally not inharmonious. His strongest forte was as a topographical artist, more especially in water-colour, and his tinted drawings executed in this medium are often both interesting and effective. It was unfortunate for Mr. Roe that his biography was in print before the large collection of Farington's diaries and letters, recently brought to light, had made their appearance at Messrs. Puttick & Simpson's, as these would doubtlessly have afforded him considerable additional material. Nevertheless, he has written an informative and highly interesting monograph, which throws a good deal of light on Farington's relations with Wilson, Lawrence, Constable, and other well-known artists, who benefited by his advice and influence. The number forms one of the best of a highly useful series, for which all lovers of early English art must be grateful to Mr. Walker."—THE CONNOISSEUR.

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WATER-COLOUR DRAWINGS

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